

DISPOSITIONS FOR AGING SPIRITUALLY

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I. Receptivity and Response

COURAGE TO GROW

Almighty God,
Source of
all the energy of life,
without You I am helpless.
Give me the courage -
the physical drive,
the emotional energy,
and the spiritual will -
to risk in order to grow,
to welcome every challenge
as my life unfolds.

- Rabbi Nachman

Growing older, I learn all the time.

- Solon

Several years ago on a trip to Rome I brought along with me a book I had shared with friends and had frequently referred to in spirituality courses I teach. This remarkable book, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by Jean-Dominique Bauby, became a best seller in Europe when it first appeared in France in 1997, and then in the United States a year later. The great novelist Cynthia Ozick hailed it as “the most remarkable memoir of our time,” and the world-famous neurologist Oliver Sacks called it “a testament to the freedom and vitality and delight of the human mind.” *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* tells the tragic story of the 43 year-old editor of the famous French magazine *Elle*. On Friday, December 8, 1995, Bauby suffered the symptoms of a massive stroke just as he was taking the wheel of his prized new vehicle, a gunmetal-gray BMW. He was showing off the car to his son Théophile, whom he had just picked up for the weekend, when the symptoms of stroke overcame him. Rushed to a nearby clinic, Bauby soon sank into a deep coma. In the book’s Prologue Bauby explains that

Up until then, I had never even heard of the brain stem. I've since learned that it is an essential component of our internal computer, the inseparable link between the brain and the spinal cord. I was introduced to this vital piece of anatomy when a cerebrovascular accident took my brain stem out of action. In the past, it was known as a "massive stroke," and you simply died. But improved resuscitation techniques have prolonged and refined the agony. You survive, but you survive with what is so aptly known as "locked-in syndrome." Paralyzed from head to toe, the patient, his mind intact, is imprisoned inside his own body, unable to speak or move. In my case, blinking my left eyelid is my only means of communication." (p. 4)

Bauby's family, friends and concerned supporters "from every corner of the world" dedicated prayers in his behalf. He speaks of eloquently of trying to "organize all this spiritual energy." (p.13) Most precious to him, however, is "the small prayer my daughter Céleste sends up to the Lord every evening before she closes her eyes." Since both fall asleep at roughly the same hour, he imagines himself "setting out for the kingdom of slumber with this wonderful talisman, which shields me from all harm." (Ibid.)

Courage and faith, along with help from the medical staff, speech therapists, and publishing colleagues, enabled the paralyzed Bauby to undertake what would seem to be the impossible for a person in his state: writing a book about it! In a chapter titled "The Alphabet," he explains how a gifted speech therapist cunningly reshuffled the alphabet to suit his purposes, "with each letter placed according to the frequency of its use in the French language." The result was a simplified dictation process for the patient: the visitor-scribe read off the alphabet (ESA version, not ABC) "until, with a blink of my eye, I stop you at the letter to be noted." (p. 20) By this method Bauby composed and completed his book, building words, sentences and paragraphs into chapters, and finally, into a fully-constructed book. The book was completed a year-and-a-half after the accident, in the summer of 1996, two months before his death.

In "The Love of God and Affliction" Simone Weil wrote that "affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death . . ." (p. 118) Although there are no guar-

antees, most of us will probably be spared affliction on the scale that Bauby experienced, which Weil suggests has spiritual repercussions. We may, if we are fortunate, avoid serious illness. If we live long, though, the processes of physical and mental decline may mark the aging process ineradicably. The changes we undergo in the process of diminishment often give “birth” to a new level of spiritual reflection.

To affirm that diminishment and suffering are creative in the reflective sphere suggests that the life of the spirit has roots in our reflective capacities. The tragic event that spurred Bauby to “organize all his spiritual energy” also made it possible for him to respond creatively to his altered circumstances. The true human person, wrote Nicholas Berdyaev, is not only a sinner, but also a creator. In losing a known and taken-for-granted life, Bauby was forced to reconsider the meaning of and the possibilities for his life.

Reflection reveals to us that even in ordinary circumstances the simplest of events of everyday life challenge and change us. Our life is always changing. Life, after all, Adrian van Kaam reminds us, is movement: “Our being by its very nature is always in movement, is always changing.” Without necessarily being aware of it, we are at some level of consciousness dialoguing with each new situation in our life, asking ourselves “What does it mean? This is especially true when illness strikes: We strive to know - to understand - what the illness means, how it affects my life.” Finally, van Kaam suggests, “The answer that you give is not only the answer that you speak, it is an answer that you *are*. In some way, in your dialogue with the new situation you have become a new being.”

Obviously, we can resist change. We can fight reality, refusing new meanings and possibilities for self-realization. It is quite natural to do so. But to refuse reflection in favor of continued resistance is to cut off access to the spirit and its power in our lives. According to Adrian van Kaam, there is danger in refusing change: If we try to get out of the natural

rhythm of unfolding, we will be “unfaithful to who we are and to *where we are* – the situation that is inviting us. If we do that we are creating a schizoid (split) situation in our own life, a split between the real ongoing dialectic in the situation and our trying to stand still, not to change. And we are not – with God – accepting who and where we are.”

As we grow older we are more apt to ask ourselves what is really meaningful for our life. We may question the meaning of past events, the meaningfulness of the future. Occasionally the questioning will be more proximate and personal: *Is my life meaningful? Has what I have done amounted to anything of value? Does it – do I – make a difference?* Such questions are value-laden. We are questioning/evaluating our worth. Elias Norbert relates these questions of meaningfulness to the way we will ultimately face dying itself:

The way a person dies depends not least on whether and how far he or she has been able to set goals and to reach them, to set tasks and perform them. It depends on how far the dying person feels that life has been fulfilled and meaningful – or unfulfilled and meaningless. The reasons for this feeling are by no means always clear – that too is an area for investigation that is still wide open. But whatever the reasons, we can perhaps assume that dying becomes easier for people who feel they have done their bit, and harder for people who feel they have missed their life’s goal, and especially hard for those who, however fulfilled their life may have been, feel that the manner of their dying is itself meaningless. (*The Loneliness of the Dying*, p. 62)

We posit the following, then, as a fundamental principle: that what we create and contribute to the world is ultimately based on what we have *received*. The principle is exemplified in Jean-Dominique Bauby’s exemplary response to the events that changed his life so dramatically. The creative act of memoir writing emerged from a situation he did not choose and certainly might have refused to accept to work with. Instead, he received and worked courageously with what was given. Receptivity of this kind is an innate form of spiritual potency that, hopefully, one learns to activate with humility through the providential experiences of one’s life.

II. Personalizing Our Spiritual Practices

Ageless Aging

Teach me, God,
to live out my days
focused on
all that is meaningful in life.
As unaccountable aches and pains
multiply,
as memory and retention fade,
teach me to relate to my physical existence
with an ever-expanding recognition
of its transient nature;
teach me to relate to my soul
with an ever-expanding awareness
of her eternal nature
and ageless worth.

- Rabbi Nachman

Responding sensibly and wholeheartedly to the “givens” in our life is one level of incarnation. Incarnational spirituality is open to the Spirit and receptive to the call to *embody* faith. Faith proceeds by works and entails praxis, a second aspect of incarnational spirituality.

What is the role of spiritual practice as we age? We have all heard many times that in our later years and in retirement, when we have more time for it, prayer becomes the “age appropriate” gift we can offer the community and the world at this stage of our journey. Although we may need to be reminded and encouraged in this regard, it might be useful to consider the role of practice in expanding our prayer repertoire. The word “practice” emphasizes our personal responsibility in discovering modes of prayer that foster spiritual deepening and enable us to go beyond prayer forms which may have become routinized. In a word, growth in prayer requires *more* from us. We may be in the habit of saying certain prayers, attending liturgy, doing spiritual reading, and occasionally “surrendering” to the deeper invitation to meditation and contemplation. But, how do you pray when you’re not reciting the office, attending Mass, or doing spiritual reading? What do we discover about ourselves and

our prayer when we reflect on such questions as the following: When and how do you pray when you are on your own? When do you *really* pray? When does prayer become more than recitation and ritual? What is individual and unique about our life of prayer may be revealed in our answers to these questions. Forms of prayer truly congenial to our spirit may be disclosed to us.

The following practices may provide assistance in discovering ways of prayer that are personally congenial:

1. Opt for fewer words and less recitation. Rely less on vocal prayers. We are called not only to read the Word but also to *become* the Word.
2. Suspend the doing function during the time of prayer. Read less and spend more time in quiet reflection and meditation. Spiritual reading does not lose its importance; we need the written word. The formative impact of reading is enhanced, however, when we turn to it with a fresh mind, renewed by contact with the Lord in the silence of our heart.
3. Slow down. When you read, do it slowly. If, for you, walking is a meditative activity, find the pace that creates a sense of spaciousness. Quality of presence is primary.

These meditative practices have effects:

1. They help us to be receptive in the manner spoken of earlier: becoming sensitized to what is given in our current life situation and to the unique *response* that is ours to make.
2. They combat anxiety. We often find it difficult to break with activity and to sit quietly in a meditative posture. Habit takes over and constrains our movements. Yet, when we make time for spiritual practice, we gradually experience a diminishment of anxiety. The “now consciousness” of meditative practice restores us to full presence. When we are present to the moment at hand we gain contact with the Spirit within us. The effects of our practice will gradually flow into daily incarnation.

3. Meaningfulness arises from meditation. We look for meaning without, but ultimately, as St. Augustine affirmed, it is to be found within. (“Late Have I Loved You”) Meditative practices constantly surprise us: What we need for the daily journey is *given* if we take time to receive!

III. Drawing Near to the Mystery

LIVING TO THE FULLEST

Dear God,
 as I age -
 as hours turn to days,
 days to weeks,
 weeks to months,
 and months to years -
 let none of my time be wasted or lost.
 Let me use my life
 to the fullest,
 to become the person
 I am meant to be.

- Rabbi Nachman

We have discussed the need to assess our life situation, to enter into dialogue with events, so that we may discern the unique response our circumstances call for and allow. Our response incarnates the call we have received. The second mode of incarnating our call has been considered in terms of spiritual practice. This mode leads to deeper presence in our field of life. It also facilitates the transition to a third mode of incarnation which transcends the previous two. Christian spirituality is a matter of presence. When we are grounded in the Lord, our presence becomes the essence of our ministry. Transcendent presence shines through our being and doing. Because it is not of our doing, this level of incarnation radiates God's love unself-consciously and in a non-discriminating way.

The discernment required in the first level of incarnation relates to the disposition of hope: hoping, that is, in the meaningfulness of our response, however humble that contribution may seem to be. Spiritual practice, the second mode, increases faith: it is active and represents an act of trust that the time we take for practice will be fruitful and efficacious. We do not know or have the fruits of practice ahead of time. Practice in this way is trusting. It contains an element of *not knowing*, of walking in darkness and being willing to risk what that darkness will lead us to. The third incarnation, being present in a way that radiates the

mystery of God, is about love. To let ourselves be and become who we really are is a testimony to our belief that all of reality is ultimately held together by Love.

Christians commit themselves to a lifelong process of spiritual and intellectual growth. We value attainments in both realms for ourselves as well as for those we teach, counsel and direct. We believe that learning and spiritual formation are goods in their own right, transcending utility. Therefore, we prize study and spiritual practice throughout life. In “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” Simone Weil made the case that the attention we learn to develop through studying can serve the higher purpose of focusing our minds when we pray. While school studies develop only the lower kind of attention, she wrote, they are nonetheless “extremely effective in increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer.” For Weil, the love of learning facilitated “the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.” (*Waiting on God*, p. 105) Ultimately our dedication to the learning process serves humanity as well as the spirit in us, and we are enjoined to continue studying and learning throughout our lives for personal enhancement and for the witness value it provides in the world.

Spiritual writers throughout the ages have distinguished between two kinds of knowledge:

On the one hand, there is relative knowledge, rooted only in reason and ideas, and lacking in the kind of experiential perception of what one knows through active engagement; such relative knowledge is what we use to order our affairs in our present life. On the other hand, there is truly authentic knowledge, gained only by actual experience, apart from reason and ideas, which provides a total perception of the known object through a participation by grace.

-St. Maximus the Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Christ*, p. 126.

The spiritual traditions of humanity seek to keep alive the dimension of experiential, or perceptual, knowledge. At the heart of our life as spiritual persons is the call to *participate* in what Maximus calls “truly authentic knowledge.” There is knowledge about God, and then there is direct experience of the Mystery of God, which results in a different kind of knowl-

edge altogether. A Christian spirituality of love grounds itself above all in experiential knowledge of Christ. The shift in later years from conceptual knowledge to experiential knowledge facilitates the witness aspect of incarnational spirituality—the growing ability to attract people of all ages to the Love of God. In a well-known prayer Cardinal Newman articulated the human aspiration for this kind of presence in the world, which reflects our potency for supra-conceptual knowledge and its manifestation in human presence:

Shine through us, and be so in us,
 that every soul we come in contact with
 may feel your presence in our soul. . . .
 Let us then praise you in the way you love best
 by shining on those around us. . . .
 Let us preach you without preaching, not by words
 but by our example, by the catching force,
 the sympathetic influence of what we do,
 the evident fullness of the love
 our hearts bear to you.

(Quoted in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*, p. 101)

Adrian van Kaam has said that we are meant to reflect to others the presence of the Mystery to us. Reflecting the Mystery of God is a matter of *being*. It is our participation in the Mystery that is reflected to others. The aging process, and sometimes illness itself, offers opportunities to relativize our fixation on doing so that we can become the radiant witnesses of God that we are meant to be. The vicissitudes of life, which include illness and aging, are the great awakeners. As we grow in awareness of the mystery that surrounds us, will we respond with gratitude or resentment for what has been given? There is so much we don't know and perhaps will never know, so much we may never accomplish! Our ability to be at peace with ourselves and others, to accept the past and to look forward in hope depends on our capacity to live with mystery. The medieval notion of *capax dei*, “capacity for God,” included the ability to tolerate ambiguity, to live with the reality of mystery, and to go on radiating God's love and presence to the fullest of our potential. In the words of Adrian van Kaam:

What we *are* is a mysterious divine plan that unfolds itself over a lifetime. The Mystery of Formation all-surrounding us, permeating us, and carrying us . . . is gradually disclosing to us who we really are. We don't know who we really are. Only God knows. But he lets us know by means of gradual disclosure over a lifetime in meeting all kinds of providential situations that begin to tell us what we are. . . . You should never try to be more than you are (i.e., by means of perfectionistic ego-striving), but you should try to be what you are. But what you are you do not know totally. It is disclosed. We should have a great willingness to listen and to disclose.

LETTING GO

Dear God,
help me grow old
with dignity and wisdom.
As the twilight years
cast their shadow upon me,
help my mind remain clear -
at peace with the world
and with itself.
Let me learn to let go
of my bonds with this world -
of my need for
honor and status;
of my attraction to
physical indulgences;
of my envy of others,
of my regrets
over all that might have been.

-Rabbi Nachman

Questions for Personal and/or Group Reflection

1. How has the aging and maturing process affected my understanding of “living a spiritual life?”
2. What practices constitute my spiritual life? When do I most feel I am living a spiritual life?
3. Have changes in my spiritual life tended to be the result of personal decisions?
 - Which changes in my spiritual life have been consciously made? (e.g., making more time for personal prayer, spiritual reading, reflection or meditation)
 - What changes in my spiritual life occurred “unconsciously”? That is, without my being aware of how the change(s) came about (e.g., discovering that I want or need to pray more; finding myself less anxious about the call to pray; experiencing periods of spontaneous prayer)
4. Has my prayer changed my relationship to:
 - My work?
 - Myself?
 - Others: community, family, friends, students, etc?
5. Have my prayer practices been worthwhile and beneficial in each of these categories? Or have I tended to feel that prayer “doesn’t work,” i.e., doesn’t make a difference in my life, the way I live, work and relate to others?
6. How would I like my prayer/spiritual life to be different?
 - What can I do to bring about the improvements I seek?
 - What must I stop doing, give up, or refrain from in order to enhance the formation of my spiritual life and prayer?
7. What persons, events or things have most inspired me to live a spiritual life? What have been the obstacles to prayer and spiritual living?
 - When have I felt most inspired and called to live a spiritual life?
 - What obstacles currently prevent me from living spiritually?

SOURCES: RECOMMENDED READINGS

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